

Diabolic marks, organs and relations: exiting symbolic misery

Article (Accepted Version)

Withers, D-M (2019) Diabolic marks, organs and relations: exiting symbolic misery. Angelaki, 24 (5). pp. 88-103. ISSN 0969-725X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/82028/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Diabolic marks, organs and relations: exiting symbolic misery

The globalised societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are decomposing, according to Bernard Stiegler. This decay is expressed by the breakdown of the compositional process between symbol and diabol - the dynamic circuit of interiorisation and exteriorisation he argues is vital for individuation - wherein symbols have become subject to mass calculation, marketisation and hyper-synchronisation. For Stiegler there is no way out of this impasse and the result is misery—a diabolic world. In Stiegler’s narration of symbolic misery, diabolic activities and aesthetic forms are not considered capable of conditioning social relations. This is surprising given how Stiegler describes the diabol as a reservoir for singularity and repository of diachronic intensity, two qualities neutralised in a condition of symbolic misery, characterised by mass-scale homogeneity and sameness. Stiegler, this article argues, is unable to think the remedial qualities of the diabol because he does not accord the diabol with inscriptive, material form. Yet the diabol has, since at least the end of the nineteenth century in Western societies, acquired transmissible properties that render diabolic communication legible across time and space. As such, diabolic inscription becomes a social aesthetic resource through which individuals and communities might individuate and co-individuate located, sensory and dissonant relations.

Using Stiegler’s conceptualisation of the diabol as a starting point, this article offers a counter-history that dis-covers the value of diabolic inscription. Through readings of Emily Dickinson’s poetry - diabolic marks - and feminist free improvisation - diabolic organs and relations - I explain how the diabol can be exteriorized and leave traces much in the same way as symbols. I outline the emergence of diabolic marks in Dickinson’s slanted dashes and compositional practices, arguing that Dickinson effectively marks out the diabol, grounded in the syntax of the —, instating the diabol’s capacity to split, force absences, defer synchrony, error, wander, disorient, suspend and dissect within poetic form. In doing so, she makes the social-aesthetic properties of the diabol available as a resource for ‘selection’ within processes of collective and co-individuation. In framing Dickinson’s marks as diabolic inscription, we can see how the diabol has, since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, been *secreted* within the public life of Western culture. Secreted but in large a secret – that is, unrecognised and undervalued.

Following the elaboration of the diabolic mark, the article moves on to discuss the diabolic organs and relations that characterise the social aesthetic practice of “free” improvisation. I argue that the “free” improvisation musical practices that emerged in the 1960s (and their aesthetic and pedagogical legacies) are a proletarianized art form par excellence, grounded in the undoing of technique and a deep “questioning of musical language” (Bailey 83). Because “free” improvisation is “open to use by almost anyone – beginners, children and non-musicians. The skill and intellect required is whatever is available” (Bailey 83), it embodies the very “(non)-knowledge (that is, an arsenal along with its mode of implementation) that would intensify diachronicity, or the power of singularization” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 1 73). Building on these observations I discuss the work of contemporary improviser Hannah Marshall, whose performances transform the cello into a transplantable, diabolic organ. In the final section we return to the question of diabolic social relations with reference to the work of improvising trio, Les Diaboliques. Combined,

these examples provide a varied evidence of the social-aesthetic properties of the diabol and its diverse capacities to condition social existence.

These case studies are situated in the wider context of the techno-mechanical inventions of the nineteenth century that automated inscriptions of movement and gesture – thus diabolising symbolic idioms on a mass scale – and the increased access to mark-marking instruments for feminised classes. Diabolic *incision*, it is proposed, only becomes possible under certain mnemotechnical conditions - the accelerated distribution of automatic apparatuses in industrialised societies in the nineteenth century which unleash “*a new stage in the process of grammatization*, now extended, in the discretisation of gesture, behaviour and movement in general, to all kinds of spheres, going well beyond the linguistic horizon” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 1 57, italics in original). Conditioned by mechanical automation, the consistencies of grammatization are loosened, resulting in the fragmentation of Western society’s idiomatic transmission of *symbolic* knowledge.

The industrial shifts of the nineteenth century are often framed as resulting in a loss of practical and social know-how. This is also a *feminisation* – accentuated within the digital (Plant 37) – as machines do the work previously practiced by human bodies, hands and minds. In the consumer cultures of 20th and 21st centuries, proletarianization becomes generalised to even greater degrees, capturing imaginative and social capacities, which also contribute to the decadent de-composition of a symbolically immiserated state (Stiegler *Decadence*). Paradoxically, though, this loss of knowledge is accompanied by its acquisition. Industrial transformations also brought about the generic ‘maturation’ of Western societies. New production and communication technologies like the printing press and postal network helped constitute a public who became competent in “reading, being read, and being capable of writing what they have read” (Stiegler *Taking Care* 24). Furthermore, economic demands led to institutional and legal changes that resulted in better quality education and a generic distribution of literacy (Marx 523-6).

At the level of culture, this had profound effects. The institutional attempt to distribute generic literacy across society meant that the ability to mark, interpret and publish became available to a wider range of people, across divisions of social class, sex and race. Those persons who were, through the violent perversions of history, positioned as feminised – more automaton than human – began to synchronise within the flows of societies becoming increasingly diabolical. Within these conditions, instrumentalised human beings began to speak, imprinting and circulating symbolic *and* diabolic marks. The minoritarian acquisition of tools and techniques forced a confrontation with symbolic idioms that constructed women, the enslaved and colonised outside the domain of the human. This, no doubt, unleashed profound dis-synchrony and error – a jarring violence – for those Others who came to individuate their psychic and embodied existence with such inadequate tools. The materialisation of the diabol – its aesthetic force - testifies to this acquisitive split. When this broad underclass of demons (those demonised, excluded, underneath, feminised, invisible and demonic) gained tools that enabled the externalisation and transmission of their existences, the incisions produced were marked by traumas that arose from the *intimate* encounter with symbolic idioms that perpetuate psychic, social and embodied violence. Acknowledging these conditions “risk[s] taking the journey to Hell”

(Flusser 10) to embrace the “vileness and, in this sense [...] the possibility of the diabol” (Stiegler *Philosophising* 88).

Symbols and diabol

Here we have, in place of an isolated machine, *a mechanical monster* whose body fills whole factories, and *whose demonic power*, at first hidden by the slow and measured motions of its gigantic members, finally bursts forth in the fast and feverish whirl of its countless working organs (Marx 503, my italics).

These instruments are as independent from us as scorpions and camels. They are subject to the same order of evolution, as are beings of protoplasm. *But the rhythm of the evolution of instruments is diabolically accelerated*. For being a more recent biological evolution, instruments are more possessed beings. *In instruments, history gallops* (Flusser 124, my italics).

The industrial changes of the nineteenth century instated automatons – mechanical monsters and demonic power – at the centre of productive life. These processes inaugurated a diabolic acceleration of existence, activating inert instruments, transforming them into possessed beings. The temporal shift enacted by these changes – feverish whirls, the galloping of history – is echoed in Stiegler’s account of the epochal transformations inaugurated by industrialisation. Within his diagnosis of Western society’s symbolic misery, articulated in dialogue with Simondon’s theories of individuation, co-individuation and trans-individuation, and Auroux and Leroi-Gourhan’s accounts of grammatization, Stiegler focuses on the break down of the compositional process between symbol and diabol in the early 21st century a context where the “systematic exploitation of symbolic production” has become “entirely subjected to the market criteria” (*Philosophising* 87).¹

Marx and Flusser articulate how automatons unleashed by industrialisation accelerate and intensify diabolic tendencies within the realm of production. Stiegler sketches the practical and social-aesthetic properties of the diabol in a more substantial vein, providing important insights about what the diabol *does*. In his work the diabol is rarely drawn on as a counter-force to symbolic misery. This is, perhaps, surprising, given how he argues the diabol holds properties a hypersynchronised society, suffering from a “lethal homogenisation” (*Philosophising* 84), lacks: diachrony, difference and singularity. Why, then, is the diabol overlooked? The first point to note is Stiegler’s conviction that “the conditions of existence, insofar as they are irreducible to subsistence alone, are *symbolic activities*” (*Decadence* 35, italics in original). Existence is only ever symbolically orientated, in other words. Stiegler also privileges particular temporalities within his account of what constitutes a healthily *composed* society. In *Philosophising by Accident* he explains that communication and meaning occur from dynamic diachronic and synchronic encounters that produce interactions, which separate and finally stabilise so that both speakers and language can *potentially* undergo psychic and collective individuation. This process is *always governed by the tendency to synchrony*, or the “synchronic horizon of the language”, because synchrony is vital “if we want to speak to one another” (*Philosophising* 84). As Stiegler writes: “the problem is not synchrony in itself but the tendency to synchrony that governs all human exchange and, in particular, all interlocution” (*Philosophising* 85). What if, then, we did not accept that the tendency toward

synchrony governed interlocution? If we did not assume synchrony was required for us to ‘speak’ to each other? What it was understood that the horizon of language was diachronic, and conditions of existence diabolic *as well as* symbolic? These perspectives are not elaborated within Stiegler’s account that remains confined in “the symbolic dispositif that has made *the unity of a society*” (*Philosophising* 87, my italics), and passes through the diachronic diabol’s disequilibria in order to reach a “welcoming and desired synchrony” (*Philosophising* 88).

Industrial processes, particularly when they infiltrate the realm of cultural production, infect the gramme, separating the letter as pure carrier of meaning. Within this context the potency of non-meaning – non-meaning when framed by the terms of the symbolic – arises as communicative force. With the invention of mnemotechnologies – the phonograph and subsequent consumer recording technologies from magnetic tape to the digital – even the most incidental breath can become a mark. A trace of existence that would have been lost becomes part of the record – a resource for re-constituting society. Diabolic inscription becomes part of the retention/protentional apparatus from which “the relation of the specific to the generic, or the diachronic to the synchronic, [...which] allows for the formalization of the Simondon’s concept of individuation as the co-individuation of an I and a We” (*Symbolic Misery I* 72-73), is composed. This point is hardly unrecognised by Stiegler. He has substantively theorised the pharmacological consequences of industrial technologies in Western societies, whether that be through the curative opening of proletarianized amateur creativity to the poisonous mass scale de-sensitisation endemic to the post-War culture industries. Nevertheless, he never articulates the new orders of grammatization as diabolic per se. We do not gain a sense, through Stiegler’s writing, of the diabol as a retentional/protentional resource that is accorded a comparative value to the symbol, even though we certainly *do* gain a sense of the diabol: It is that which produces “individual singularity” (*Philosophising* 88) and functions as the “dynamic and paradoxical principle of a healthy synchronic” (*Philosophising* 88).

Paying close attention to *the values* attributed to temporal processes enables analysis of biases and exclusions that are not always directly expressed in Stiegler’s work. These biases, I want to suggest, prevent Stiegler from thinking the diabol as a resource from which the social might be forged and existence *conditioned*. As I have argued elsewhere, Stiegler’s discussions of dis-orientation from cardinality and calendarity, or a shared sense of time and space through the generalised control of retentions by the global cultural industries, are based on the presumption that communities must share the same, “common” time and space to be able to communicate (Withers 2015). Dis-orientation, therefore, arises as displacement from such shared systems, even when there is accommodation within such systems for “diachronic local manifestations” (*Technics and Time 3* 121). Tellingly, however, it is the disruption of social *synchronicities* which result in the acute and “primordial nature of the current *disorientation*” (*Technics and Time 3* 168). Stiegler’s own orientations thus betray synchronic-equilibrium-symbolic biases that act as the horizon to his thinking. There is not room to consider compositional processes that do not, ultimately, conclude in synchrony—moments of convergence within which the *We* agrees, settles or meta-stabilises, into (welcoming) unity, the Same.

Privileging this temporal dynamic leads to the persistent sovereignty of a particular kind of rhythm, interaction and movement within social life. It means that other

temporalities – or what might call social diachronicities – are not considered as a potential site for *conditioning* social relations. There is not the sense that people can exist in different times and still be ‘together.’ Such interactions may occur during the individuation process in which interlocutors undergo a “crossing of the stage” from diachrony to synchrony, diabol to symbol. This movement is necessary for creativity and transformation, he argues, for accessing potential, and igniting singularities. Yet diachrony cannot hold the social in its proper time and space – it is only ever “local” and “specific” rather than “social” and “generic”. The result of such positioning and temporal biases is certainly contradictory. Although we glimpse the tantalising possibility of the diabol in Stiegler’s work, it remains contained within a specific relational configuration that subjugates its potential. For individuation to “work” as a relational system the symbol relies upon the diabol to be intelligible, synchronicity is dependent on diachronicity. The following passage from Yuk Hui, whose work is in dialogue with Stiegler’s thought, reproduces these biases about the diabol. Here the diabol is feminised in its alignment with the snake in the Garden of Eden: it is woman, Other, profane and demon.

Diabolos is from *dia-ballô*, to divide. *Diabolos* is *diable*, the devil. Therefore, one unites and the other separates. The snake in the Garden of Eden is the *diable* that separates. However, the symbol is by no means opposed to the *diable*, simply because unification is only possible when there is separation. The Symbol tends to unite what is separated, while this separation is not simply a separation in distance, but rather between the *visible* and the *invisible*, the *sacred* and the *profane*.

Might then Symbol be to diabol what Sun is to Moon; Culture to Nature; Day to Night; Father to Mother; Head to Heart; Intelligible to Palpable; Logos to Pathos; Man to Woman, to paraphrase Hélène Cixous? She writes how there is

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it carries us, beneath all its figures, wherever discourse is organized. If we read or speak, the same thread or double braid is leading us throughout literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation and reflection (63).

While there is not an explicit opposition of symbol and diabol, the diabol nonetheless is figured as “invisible”, “profane” and therefore outside of the proper realm of social existence. The diabol, as the *feminised* path – the route of temptation, of separation from what is known, deviation the legible and visible – is not excluded but *subjugated* in its relation with the symbol. This is part of the reason why Stiegler is not able to imagine the diabol as a resource: he is orientated within an inherited tradition defined by the systematic devaluation of the feminised and this bars his cultural access to, and social experience of, the diabol. What is paradoxical about our current historical moment, inaugurated with the mass industrialisations of the nineteenth century but accelerated with increasing waves of technological transformations, is that the feminised - the realm of the automated, the instrumentalised, the not quite human – have increasingly driven the evolution – and control – of society. This is not to say that women and other subjugated groups are now emancipated because of the mass industrialisations of culture and economy. Far from it. However, the shifting dynamics of symbol and diabol, the tussle of mechanical forces that unfurl as they compose and re-compose society have swung *toward* the diabol, creating openings for

feminised subjects to mark out their space and time – their bodies – to transmit existences, which are always already diabolic existences, since they emerge from demonic grounds (Wynter; see also Solomon).

The increased access to instruments for the historically instrumentalised unfolds within an context of mass hyper-synchronisation which fundamentally disrupts individuation processes or, as Stiegler writes: in “the hyper-industrial age, this exteriorization no longer allows for a correlative interiorization – taking place as a diachronization as it interiorizes a synchronic structure” (*Symbolic Misery I* 71). Given the qualities that Stiegler distributes to the diabol in his texts – the specific, singularity, the realm of diachrony, potentials and difference – we might wonder why he does not consider diabolic practices and aesthetics as a potential site through which the social might become re-conditioned. Yet, as I have already argued, this oversight occurs because the diabol is below the symbol in Stiegler’s figuration, it is “Matter, concave, ground—where steps are taken, holding—” (Cixous 63) rather than an exteriorised resource that forms part of a rentional/ protentional apparatus – or pre-individual funds – that subjects might interiorise and claim as their inheritance and *already-there* (*Technics and Time I*; Withers).

Yet the diabol is already-there. Why, then, can’t the diabolic time/spaces of diachrony and dis-equilibrium be *where* the ability to sense with others is cultivated, even amid the most apparently abject circumstances? If the diabol produces individual singularity, it is arguably even more important now, in this era of hyper-digital calculability - an era deplete of meaningful accidents - to move *within* its potentialities. Could “diachronic intensity”, which keeps “open” the “potential singularities and playing field” of exchange, similarly “create a strong sense of belonging” that Stiegler implies is only really possible through “strong synchronic links” (*Philosophising* 85)? If the diabol offers techniques for thought – movements and fluxes of temporal difference - how might it be applied as *social knowledge*, as practical and aesthetic action? How might a cultural politics forged from diabolical practices condition existence in therapeutic ways? In which aesthetic forms and practices is this happening already?

To answer these questions I now trace the material inscriptions and practices of diabol. Through elaboration of diabolic marks, organs and relations I demonstrate how the diabol need not synchronise while facilitating social belonging and relation; that disorientation can be welcoming and desired; that diabolic relations can create strong links between people and things that occur and unfold within time. We must not misrecognise the diabol’s capacity to separate, scatter, pull apart, disperse, error, wander, become lost and *incalculable* as being “condemned to de-compose, which is precisely the meaning of *diabelein*” (*Symbolic Misery I* 58). Leveraging the power of the diabol is to nestle into the points where lines break, to undergo *a process of decomposition* and deliberate (deliberative) disorientation. We begin with a series of fissures marked by slanted dashes. How does that—break—that—mark—become more generically intelligible – desired and *social*?

The Diabolical Mark

How does the diabolic mark emerge if it is not – or something other than – a symbol?
How does it communicate sense, feeling, being?

A not admitting
of the Wound
Until it grew so
Wide (Dickinson *Envelope* 13)

How can inscription be other to what symbolises or synthesises but undoes fixity,
releasing “radical scatters” (Werner *Gorgeous*) – the syntactical potency of the
diabol?

That all my
Life had Entered it
And ~~troughs~~ there
Were troughs
Besides —
was space
Room — (Dickinson *Envelope* 13)

This section discusses the — in Emily Dickinson’s poetry, an insurgent incision that renders visible the paradoxical absence, separation and splitting that characterises *the diabolic mark*. Like poet Susan Howe (*My Emily* 6), I first encountered Dickinson through the Thomas H. Johnson edited *Emily Dickinson: The Complete Poems*. In this collection the marks were always thick, straight and long - for a dash - and loomed large as Mountains or Citadels, became familiar as Bees or Coffins. The certainty of the — on the page – made it steady and articulate. It opened a path, an avenue for redaction. — suggested the symbolic could be taken away, while the multiple “cleaving” minds in Dickinson’s poems (*Complete* 439) indicated that symbolic pressures were painful and unhealthy; that reason’s operation *upon* the world was insufficient:

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down -
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing – then – (Dickinson *Complete* 129)

Perhaps it was better if reason were taken away? These — signalled that one can finish knowing, be broken - like that plank - but still exist in the dislocated space/time hanging – speechless - populated with nothing else but a recurrent minus sign — The — acts as an opening to an animate blankness whose contours others might also learn to empty, outside the formality of well ordered sentences, under everywhere else that appears enclosed. Howe calls this Dickinson’s “linguistic *decreation*” (*My Emily* 13, my italics).

The — is how Dickinson *marked out* the diabol. She was pointing the way, opening a *path*. Her incision was, in fact, a “highly social act [that] gives the traces of our existence the possibility of an Afterlife” (Bell 2). “Life had Entered” the diabol. It

could extend, “free” to transmit separations because she, queer woman, filled with all kinds of emergent, obtuse rhythms, laid it bare; a *condition* of the world *re-opened* and ever interrupted. The diabol has always existed as potentiality – it is that low hum or secreted gesture exchanged between those without recourse to public mark making instruments; the resistant gestures of the instrumentalised. Normatively, the symbolic rush for synchrony has eclipsed the diabol in a movement to unite what is contingently - and yes - beautifully separated. Dickinson inscribed the diabol – she exteriorised it with care in a cultivated under-public of her own design. The diabol mark — became an arrow, an exit sign, capable of spreading its peculiar, dislocating force, across space and time.

The recent publication of Dickinson’s “envelope poems” facilitates deeper engagement with her diabolic marks, now always emerging within the broad present (Gumbrecht) of an archivally composed, digital culture (Withers). The digital scans of the envelopes reveal how, from 1870 onwards, Dickinson composed poems on scraps of found paper – shopping lists, food wrappers, envelope flaps and advertisements – in order to “grapple with issues of variation, unknowability, and indeterminacy in a material context that embodied those very issues” (Socarides 146). The scans also reveal Dickinson’s diabolic mark to be variable – quite unlike the straight, steady — I previously associated with her work. While the wavering movement of the Dickinson dash is hardly a revelation for scholars engaged with her oeuvre, the archival circulation of these images afforded them a new force and public life – an emergent diabolic legibility. Furthermore, it is not merely the movement of the diabolic mark that can now be observed. The wavering arrow points to multiple forms of empty, yet animate, spatial-diachronic dis-equilibriums and *the embodied technique that made the mark*, carrying forth potential to “surprise itself at the instant of writing” (Howe ‘Preface’ 7).

That is, in the digital archive of the envelope poems we encounter Dickinson’s body, we can look closely upon page where she left diabolic marks, hover over the fragments to stand or sit in her place; we can enlarge the site of the arrow’s incision to better “grasp force in its movement in a printed text” (Howe ‘Preface’ 7). To do so requires imagination – a diabolic imagination – and willingness to move into her place *before* the page in order to mimic slashes; to re-enact what it feels like to mark, and mark in *that way* – to make arrows that point to an emergent nowhere. If such – when such – embodied imaginings and movements are *entered into*, the diabolic circuit becomes complete or, rather, becomes undone. Dickinson’s dashes have for some time now been viewed as much more than an eccentric refusal of the “order [...] shut inside the structure of a sentence” (Howe *My Emily* 12). The digital copies widen understanding of the marks as a *technique* – as techné and socially circulating craft – that saws open possibilities for inscription; a *separation* of what was firmly shut down.

A closing of the
 simple lid that
 Gate
 opened to the sun
 Until the tender
 sovereign
 Carpenter

Perpetual nail
it down – (*Envelope* 13)

Separation infused with movement, action, purpose, play and – that archetypical Dickinson word – *possibility*. Dwell in possibility or, we might venture, dwell in the diabol. In the late period of her life Dickinson “laboured over [her poem’s] endings, creating explosions of variants within their final lines, extracting pieces in order to resolve the problem of their endings” (Socarides 147). These compositional processes – which interrupt and de-compose the possibility of a “finished” work, with a definite, *unified* “end” – were, Socarides argues, wholly supported by the materials Dickinson wrote upon. The poet was experimenting with (de) compositional processes that explored different – what we may now call diabolic – notions of relation and order. These were grounded in the impulse to interrupt the equilibrium of what might otherwise appear settled and closed, a means “to seize upon luck and accidents—slips on paper slips” (Howe ‘Preface’ 7).

This reading of Dickinson’s processes enables us to understand the diabol as something that is materially, if not always symbolically, situated. The diabol is fashioned through the scrap as much as the marks made upon it. *It has material form*, in other words, which is used to engineer movements of time and space within processes that are radically open to contingency in word and deed, an aesthetic sense and mode of participation that arises through response to accidents (which are also opportunities). We should note that Dickinson’s marks were outside the “proper” place of the public, symbolic life of her day. She published in a self-made archive, for the diabolic world to come. She constructed circuits through letters, a relational and appropriate form for a mortal feminised body like hers, without recourse to public life. Her inscriptions were supported by material from the everyday; these in turn enabled the honing of a diabolic craft. We see the world beginning (again) in the “multiple or contingent orders” gathered upon Dickinson’s “scraps, drafts, and fragments” (Werner *Scenes of Reading* 4-5); the trace of her demonic body transcribes a new possibility.

The mark of diabol is an arrow that points out - and therefore refers to – nothing, worlds where subjects invent themselves out of annihilation. The diabolic mark is qualitatively different to symbolic signs that claim to refer to *something* (even if that something is mutable, contextual and arbitrary). The diabolic mark renders disorientation palpable, splitting open a deliberative space where, amid a gorgeous nihilism, hope gratefully flounders. Dickinson’s diabolic mark ensured, for the first time in history, diabolic incisions became part of the “secondary tertiary retentions of the *We* that make the selection of primary retentions possible in the everyday flow” (Stiegler *Philosophising* 88). The diabol becomes, in other words, a mnemonic resource—a tool—from which psychic, social and technical life can be individuated.

The Diabolic Organ

We now move on to elaborate further dimensions of the diabol’s existence within a materially supported – if not always symbolic – social: diabolic organs and relations. We encounter these mediations of the diabol in the improvised cello playing of Hannah Marshall and Les Diaboliques—a trio comprised of doyennes of feminist free improvisation Joëlle Léandre, Maggie Nicols and Irène Schweizer. “Free”

improvisation is, I will argue, the diabolic art form *par excellence*. It is also a *proletarianized* social aesthetic art form that arose within a symbolic context which had been proletarianized at the level of nervous system and imagination (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 2 26), and within which new recording consumer technologies enabled the inscription and mass transmission of diabolic marks – gasps, grunts, hesitations and silences. In this sense “free improvisation” responds to and is paradoxically nurtured by the condition of physical, emotional and psychic ruin endemic to symbolic misery.

As social and aesthetic weapons, “free” improvisation offers techniques and interpretive resources that mark out the passage to another stage that overcomes symbolic misery and moves into a “new epoch of sense” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 241) — a new epoch of *diabolical* sense.

Singularity, Diachrony, Aesthetics

Since the 1960s, free improvisers have self-consciously constructed aesthetic practices that embrace the art of negation. Bailey described his musical practice as one of “self-erasure” (1999), while Jennie Gottschalk, writing about the improvising group AMM, states: “their ideology has always been one of *starting from nothing: no score, no formal system, no discussion* of what they will do in an upcoming concert, and no reverting to ‘ready-made or repeated forms’” (135-136, my italics). Undoing symbolic knowledge—or we might say embracing a proletarianized condition or sensibility—*opens up* the pathways of the diabol. Indeed, symbolic knowledge is what blocks access to the diabolic sense circuit; it turns the social away from “it” because the symbolic frames diabolic sounds as ugly, barbaric and utterly indigestible, illegible. Sensibility itself, therefore, requires re-socialisation if the possibility of diabolical vileness is to be entered into.

The diabol, as we have established, is what produces “individual singularity” (Stiegler *Philosophising* 88). The social context of improvised performance becomes a site to access and *intensify* singularity within a collective setting. As Georgina Born, George Lewis and Will Straw write:

Group improvisation involves essentially dialogical engagements between the improvisers, so that they are compelled to communicate with one another, all parties receiving, negotiating, responding to, and attempting to create meaningful (musical or performance) utterances and gestures in real time...this dialogical aesthetic practice is also, immanently, a social interaction (10).

This point is echoed by contemporary improviser Hannah Marshall, who describes her practice as “a communal/social activity where there are powerful connections between people, within which a balance can be attained *between being utterly myself and also becoming totally immersed in another’s musicality*” (my italics). The individuating context of free improvisation unfolds within a diachronic “container,” which enable performer to become singular while being immersed in the vibrations generated by others. Synchronic elements in free improvised music do of course occur, yet they do not determine the *overall form* of the encounter, which remains held—or extends within—the *potentials* of the diabolic field. That is, the synchronic

elements do not overturn *the fact* that what is unfolding is occurring *within heterogeneous time*, generated by the precise musical socialities of the performers and the observing audience whose bodies and organs, by virtue of proximity, participate in this circuit of sense created (Born). Efforts are not made to *force* synthesis; it is not *desired*, but treated with care if or when it happens. The primary imperative is to observe the unfolding and respond to what *is there* through cultivated attention that is both muscular—“preparation is necessary to develop strength, dexterity, good habits and indeed techniques” (Marshall)—and psychic. Synchronic elements are not erased - they are what remain visible, intuitive and graspable to those socialized via symbols - yet within the “free” diachrony of improvisation they do not carry the same capacity to stop, enclose, finish and *represent*. They do not *signal* to such actions and do not have the same power to influence and *anchor* social encounters, or condition the parameters of aesthetic expression.

The diabol, aesthetically, is a de-composition; it occurs within scenes of undoing. Marshall notes this paradox: “as a musician I must ‘know’ what I am doing, whereas in improvisation it is often essential that I don’t.” The improvising artist can disrupt synchronic expectation and “break down the perceptions that the audience (and I) may have about my instrument sound and the history/genre that we think it speaks from”, distributing diabolic sensibility. This resides in the undoing of the instrument itself, which is transformed into a *diabolic organ*.

Through playing with *de-tuned/slackened* strings, making use of microtones (tones that sit between the western semitone), using the wood of the bow and body, using the fingers of both hands to activate and mute strings simultaneously, using other parts of the finger such as my nails to flick the strings and using distortion. *Through seeing the ‘Cello simply as a construction made of parts*: Strings, strung over a box held up by a bridge and activated in different ways with fingers, bow, rosin, movement and air and other preparations (my italics).

Through un-learning perceptions of her instrument Marshall comes to “know” it in a different way. De-tuning, slackening, loosening and stretching; activating alternative connections and conceptions of resonance, treating the instrument as a collection of singular yet connected – but potentially disconnected – parts, becomes the means through which a technical, non-living organ like the cello becomes a vector to transmit and institute a *diabolic* circuit of sense. The *aesthetic practice* of the diabol is characterised by *unravelling* learnt technique in order to mobilise technical instruments—non-living yet animated organs—to shatter, pull apart, break and hesitate. It is an always already proletarianized art form, elaborated from *nothing*.

Diabolic organs (like symbolic organs) are prosthetic and therefore transplantable – in this *sense* they a gift. When I watch Marshall perform, the cello cradled between her legs, unpicking its parts through masturbatory, auto-tuned movements, dismembering and re-membering the organ as a giver of sense, I am affected; I am re-shaped as I move *into* what is offered. I feel the organ *as mine*; as the air wavers the material residues of sound massage my insides, a seed planted that may grow from this act of transfer: *diabolisis*. This offering is techné – the craft of the diabol. Yet this is a diabolic not a symbolic craft - it institutes a separation, enabling movement into the *social* and relational space that exists around the edges of where the arrow points to

nowhere. Marshall practices a diabolic craft that she previously *received*; she is now able to give sense to this organological weapon for others. Across history only a limited number of bodies have been allocated social, economic, cultural and technical *power* to facilitate the transplantation of the social and aesthetic organs – to bear organs and leave marks. Here energy is torn from bow and slackened strings, and diabolic sense is released to intermingle, deposit, press against—force openings in—muscular and psychic organs which become sensitised to the diabol as a social and aesthetic location, those “exclamatory possibilities constitutive of gift and counter-gift” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 2 27).

Diabolic Relation

The image betrays their communication perfectly. During performance, Irène Schweizer looks up from her piano keys, tracking the flux of interactions she is embedded within, always responding, always looking. Her gaze is directed by that arrow pointing nowhere, commanding the audience to do more than just listen, but to enter into a relation within the unfolding event. The photographic trace of this *looking* allows us to see the social construction of the diabolic relation in action - the diabol’s *aesthetic techniques* this article has given form to.

< Insert Figure 1 Irène Schweizer performs at Voicebox, Derby 18 November 2016. Photograph courtesy of author >

<Insert Figure 2>

<Insert Figure 3>

That Schweizer, one of the most celebrated free improvising pianists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, “looks” at her fellow players during performance is nothing out of the ordinary. On this occasion her fellow performers are vocalist Maggie Nicols and double bassist Joëlle Léandre. Together they are Les Diaboliques. Les Diaboliques parade the diabol flagrantly – they bear its name - and enact its possibility. Three queer women, aged between 65-75, performing on stage, *relating*, diabolically. Collectively and as individuals, Les Diaboliques are (somewhat ironically) *virtuosic* in the diabolic arts of free improvisation. Their art is “about life...and love...who we are...in this *terrible* world, that’s so full of *shit!*” (Léandre) This is the trio’s “kaka” – “less vulgar than shit”, Nicols comments during one performance - which draws together the immediate environment – spatial, mnemonic, everyday and political – to become a shared musical language expressed through their relationship, a *diabolic relation*.

The *diabolic relation* is, primarily, what can be discerned through Léandre, Nicols and Schweizer’s interactions. The trio *dramatize*, enact and embody the diabol as a compelling aesthetic, social and political location, demonstrating how its techné can be used to relay humour, sustenance and provocation. This craft of the diabol has been cultivated for nearly forty years, its genesis residing in projects like the late 1970s Feminist Improvising Group (FIG). FIG, and other women-centred improvisation projects that emerged in Europe in its aftermath, created an experimental context within which a diabolic social grammar could be dis-covered and cultivated by bodies normatively denied expression. The “language” engendered by such circuits was fragile and ephemeral in a very real sense, loved by few people – unintelligible – diabolic – to most. The cultural re-evaluation and reclamation of

demonised “feminine” expression, supported by women-centred social movements and an emergent feminist theory of the late 1970s, enabled such aesthetic projects to become intelligible as something social – a signal, if not a sign – of something other than “madness” or “noise.” The *figure* of the hysteric was significant in such contexts, reclaimed as subversive because her halting, semi-formed speech materialised the breakdown of the symbolic and bore the hallmarks of its violent effects. The feminist hysteric announced a completely different kind of symbolic misery to the one described by Stiegler – a misery borne of demonization and systematic exclusion. She was the figure that made apparent there was a ground to symbolic reason, and that such ground was laden with inequalities, erasures, silences, prohibitions, *rules* and dispossessions.

The hysteric in the symbolic is always at risk of synthesis, Clément reminds us (1997). Her disruptive potential is contained, signifying nothing other than “repugnant feminine excess in the ‘non-sensical’ voice” (Ferrett 85). The hysteric in the diabol, however, is free to express her language, use gesture and body to communicate her will. Nicols’ “pseudo-linguistic” (Smith 181) vocal performances find their social and aesthetic *home* within the diabol, amid its contours she is liberated from “making sense.” Nicols’ elliptical screeches, delivered within rhythmic emphases always occurring in time, make art (and life) out of nothing and mark out points of contact with others. Such abject stuttering and muttering mobilises the breath as a diabolic organ not merely to *return* what is *repressed* or to *haunt* a symbolic that despises and expunges such forms. No. These diabolic gestures and enunciations *incise* the social and create autonomous social relations with their own *diachronic* and *singular* points of reference. They are ingrained with memory – the re-membling of diabolic technique, socially practiced and integrated into the circuit, the residue of social resistance, which erupt, as traumatic memories can do, to force open a path, acting out “positive echoes of instinctual apparatuses” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery* 2 145) because their legacies have not yet been adopted in the (psycho-social) body.

During a Les Diaboliques performance at Arnolfini, Bristol, UK, on November 20 2016, Nicols recalls the first verse/chorus of the Italian Communist Party Anthem “Bandiera rossa” over a dramatic duel staged by Léandre and Schweizer. Her action mobilises a cultural fragment, a mnemonic vibration Nicols believes she first learnt on a tour of Italy with FIG in the late 1970s (2017). Nicols delivers a rousing rendition of the anthem, which metamorphoses into a worried scream, and, later, a demonic growl in the final line: “Viva L’anarchisma e la liberta.” In the shadow of Trump’s election, Nicols’ retrieval of the song from her reservoir of secondary retentions – provoked and held in time by her musical partner’s diachronic interplay - relays the necessity to remember resistant imaginaries and vocabularies of liberation despite normative claims they are redundant, and have no relevance to *social* time and space. Here the song – which appears incomplete in performance, much like the unfinished work of anti-capitalist, socialist and feminist liberation movements - becomes a tool, a gift, massaged *into* the social through diabolic processes. Its activation connects those present to the embodied memory of previous generations of creative, women-centred struggle. These circulate as ephemeral residue - an *orientation* within a circuit that seeks to invent other worlds and relations.

The diabolic relation begins with Léandre, Nicols and Schweizer but extends beyond them. As an apparatus, or micro-social system, it is designed so that audience and

performers are situated in coordinates that nurture the intensification of singularity experienced differentially across the circuit of assembled bodies. A basic unit of the diabolic relation, then, is the *extension of relation* itself – *a drawing together of social bodies to participate a circuit* – a *bare circuit* that occurs in the diachronic immediacy of the unfolding here and now. For a decomposed society, that has lost the aesthetic capacity to participate due to hyper-synchronization, which “tends to eliminate the diachrony of the *we*, which is, equally, the consciousness of the *I*” (Stiegler *Symbolic Misery I* 74, italics in original), such a technique re-animates the social body through a re-wiring of its most rudimentary circuitry. While “real-time” technologies synchronise the psychosocial body in a manner that dislocates critical and sensate faculties, the intense singularity of diabolic relation enables those present to undergo *diabolisis*. The singular time space of the diabolic relation is performative in that *brings that world into being* with gestural and affective utterances. Yet it is the singularity of the circuit itself – its integrity and robustness – that holds the social together as connections are pulled apart and stretched open, participants enter into relations that error and break, are thrown apart and wander. *Diabolisis* nurtures resistance to synthesis so the unexpected might emerge, its nourishment is possible because the circuit—despite being riven with diachronic punctures—holds together, tethered by resonance, echo, breath, vibration. There is time to rest in the silence, instances to recover in the breaks. To stutter is ability, a mode of timing and response, faltering becomes technique and, moreover, care. The time spaces carved open through diabolic relations compose a “*critical apparatus*” (Stiegler ‘Quarrel’ 46, italics in original) which creates the conditions for amateurs to become “organologically equipped with practical [diabolic] knowledge, with an *instrument*, and with a *social apparatus supporting the circuit of transindividuation*” (Stiegler ‘Quarrel’ 46, italics in original).

For the uninitiated, free improvised music can sound vile. It is not “like music” but a clamour of absurd noises that fail to synchronise in an appropriate manner. The unique value of the diabol is to force separations to rework cultural taste based on the principle of indigestion (see also Haraway). For those who experience such dissonance, this may be perceived as a failure of the circuit to hold together, to provide a meaningful social space. In this *wholly different* inverted aesthetic and social world, the diabolic relation socialises a context capable of re-valuing all that the symbol has deemed prohibited and vile. Nevertheless, Les Diaboliques understand they are drawing their audiences into “foreign” territory. Translation, as a performative pedagogy that opens the diabol to those present, to extend it, is one technique they use to invite the audience to participate in the transmission of a different – diabolic – social-aesthetic location. Mid-way through the final concert of the 2016 Les Diaboliques tour at Arnolfini, Bristol, Léandre begins to saw at her double bass, resting within a handful of notes. Off microphone she begins to frenetically mutter in French – coded as a foreign, alien language in post-Brexit Britain – which Nicols accompanies with tap dance, while Schweizer interjects sporadic low notes on the piano. As Léandre’s speech heightens its absurdity and distress, Nicols struggles to translate what she is saying for the audience. “The flour in the salad”, “it’s France,” “it’s not good, the country, the wine, the wine, the wine is good,” “ummmmm....it’s the life, oh the life”. Through her performance of translation Nicols reflects back to the audience a sense of what they might be experiencing. Translation becomes a way to leverage agency—to extend the diabolic relation—to laugh at not understanding, and the struggle to do so. Nicols facilitates a

process that enables the audience to “engage actively [...] to develop new means of translation, interpretation and understanding, *inventing our own ways of listening and sounding that defy linguistic and musical conventions*” (Smith 195, my italics). These interactions, like many other moments in Les Diaboliques’ performances, are hilarious. The diabolic relation is garrulous, excitable and hysterical – a far cry from misery. Laughter animates the circuit, as Nicols continues to translate Léandre’s babble:

The freeque the frou, the freeque...it’s the...oh we don’t care, it’s not good, it’s not good we don’t care, its bad, it’s bad, it’s small, it’s small, the bread is small, fragile, the bread is very fragile, it’s hopeless, it’s finished, it’s the end of the haricot beans, it’s the end of haricot, it’s just the end of haricot (Arnolfini).

An arrow pointing nowhere

At the end of haricot other aesthetic practices and social relations *force* intelligibility into the world. The specific value of the diabol becomes increasingly evident; it is an emergent location and technique of “knowing” available to the new amateur, who weaves sensibility from the undone paths unleashed by the diabol. This article has argued that the diabol conditions aesthetic and social participation, cultivating orders of sense that are qualitatively different to the symbol. The diabol emerges within an epochal condition defined by the proletarianization of sensibility (Stiegler ‘Proletarianization’). It is the art of making life out of nothing, of *beginning to sense again*, to cultivate response-ability with others (Haraway). Taking seriously *and practicing* the inscriptive, aesthetic and social techniques of the diabol inaugurates more than a phase shift: the diabol does not depend on – subjugate – the symbol in order to be intelligible; it is not governed by the master urge for synthesis. Within diabolic sense, quite radically – even in a persistently senseless and insensible world – there is no requirement, no pressure, *for sense to be made* “out of it”. The diabol’s marks, organs and relations are vital social and aesthetic *resources* which recover diachrony, intensify singularity, support apprenticeships, distinguish misery and re-circulate desire for the world.

Works cited

Bailey, Derek. *Improvisation: Its Nature and Practice in Music*. Da Cape Press, 1993.

———. *Fairly Early With Postscripts (1971-1998)*. Emanen 4027. B0000257SS, 1999.

Bell, Vikki. ‘Between documentality and imagination: Five theses on curating the violent past.’ *Memory Studies*, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698016673238>.

Born, Georgina. ‘Music and the Materialization of Identities’. *Journal of Material Culture*. 16:4, 2011, pp. 376-388.

Born, Georgina, Lewis, George and Straw, Will. ‘After relational aesthetics: Improvised musics, the social, and (re)theorising the aesthetic.’ In: Born, Georgina,

Lewis, George and Straw, Will (eds) *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, pp. 33-59.

Cixous Hélène and Clément Catherine. *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans Wing, Betsy. London: I.B. Tauris, 1997.

Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems*. Eds. Johnson, Thomas, H. London: Faber, 1976.

——— *Envelope Poems*. New York: New Directions, 2016.

Ferrett, D. 'Improvising Themes of Abjection with Maggie Nicols'. *Performance Research*. 19:1, 2014, pp. 81-90.

Gottschalk, Jennie. *Experimental Music Since 1970*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

Gumbrecht, Hans. *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

Flusser, Vilem. *The History of the Devil*, trans Novaes, Rodrigo Maltez, Minnesota: Univocal, 2014.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Howe, Susan. *My Emily Dickinson*. New Directions: New York, 2007.

——— 'Preface'. In: Werner, Marta and Bervin, J, eds. *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*. New York: New Directions, 2013, pp. 6-7.

Hui Yuk. 2017. 'On a possible passing from the digital to the symbolic'. In: *2 or 3 Tigers*. Available online: http://hkw.de/en/tigers_publication/.

Léandre, Joelle. Personal correspondence with author, 2016.

Les Diaboliques. 2016. Performance at Arnolfini, Bristol 20 November. Available: <https://soundcloud.com/arnolfiniarts/les-diaboliques-live-from-arnolfini>.

McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

Marshall, Hannah. Personal correspondence with author, 2017.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Fowkes, B. London: Penguin, 1990.

Nicols, Maggie. Personal correspondence with author, 2017.

Plant, Sadie. 'Feminisations: Reflections on Women and Virtual Reality' in Leeson, Lynn Hershman ed. *Clicking Hot Links to a Digital Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1996, pp. 37-39.

Socarides, Alexandra. *Dickinson Unbound: Paper, Process, Poetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Soloman, Sam. 'Offsetting queer literary labor'. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 24 (2), 2017, pp. 239-266.

Smith, Julie Dawn. 'Perverse Hysterics: The Noisy *Cri* of Les Diaboliques.' In: Rushtin NT and Tucker S (eds) *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, pp. 180-208.

Stiegler, Bernard. *Philosophising by Accident*, trans Dillet, Benoit. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017a.

——— 'The Quarrel of the Amateurs'. *boundary 2*. 44(1), 2017b, pp. 35-53.

——— 'The Proletarianization of Sensibility'. *boundary 2*. 44(1), 2017c, pp. 5-19.

——— *Symbolic Misery: Vol 2: The Catastrophe of the Sensible*. Trans. Norman, Barnaby. Basingstoke: Polity, 2015.

——— *Symbolic Misery: Vol. 1, The Hyperindustrial Epoch*. Trans. Norman, Barnaby. Basingstoke: Polity, 2014.

——— *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*. Trans. Ross, Daniel. Cambridge: Polity, 2011a.

——— *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Trans. Barker, Stephen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011b.

——— *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. Trans. Barker, Stephen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010.

——— *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Trans. Beardsworth, Richard and Collins, George. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

Werner, Marta and Bervin, Jen (eds.) *Emily Dickinson: The Gorgeous Nothings*, New York: New Directions, 2013.

Werner, Marta. *Emily Dickinson's Open Folios: Scenes of Reading, Surfaces of Writing*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Withers, Deborah. *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission: Theory, Practice and Cultural Heritage*. London: Rowman Littlefield International, 2015.

Wynter, Sylvia. 'Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the "Demonic Ground" of Caliban's Women.' In: Davies CB and E Savory Fido (eds) *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990, pp. 355-72.

¹ The full articulation of Stiegler's argument about symbols and diabol is promised in the yet to be published fourth volume of *Technics and Time*. There are, however, significant discussions of these concepts in *Symbolic Misery* volumes 1 and 2, and in the interview collection *Philosophising By Accident*. This article draws on these existent resources to argue that the diabol is an important, and under-utilised theoretical weapon in Stiegler's armoury.